

## LEARNING CHINESE

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China, like that blessed word Mesopotamia, has until comparatively recent years been surrounded in the mind of the average Occidental with a haze of mysterious romance. In the not far distant past, the Chinese were chiefly known in the West as strange beings, gorgeously arrayed, with slanting eyes and manners splendidly aloof, whose chief occupations in life were the polite infliction of diabolically ingenious tortures upon squirming victims, and the skilful wielding of chopsticks. All that was popularly realized concerning their customs, psychology, diet, and personal habits was tersely summed up in the phrase "the heathen Chinese is peculiar". Kubla Khan himself, amid the enchanted pleasure-grounds of Coleridge's vision was not more remote from the workaday world than China from the knowledge and interest of the majority of Europeans and Americans fifty years ago.

The times of this ignorance have now gone by. The pigtail, the pagoda, and the paper lantern no longer hold undisputed sway over the western imagination as sole symbols of the genius of the Chinese race, for China herself has risen up and broken the spell that held us blind. The great world powers today are recognising more and more fully the colossal weight of her influence upon the future of humanity and increasing numbers of traders, scientists, missionaries, journalists and diplomatists—pioneers in every sphere of modern thought and effort—are flocking to her shores and penetrating far into her vast dominions.

Widely different motives bring them to China, and the ends they have in view are equally varied. But the curse of Babel, which of old divided the nations, separates them from those whose hearts or minds or money-bags they hope to reach, and they find themselves under the pressure of a common necessity, which gives them one united aim—that of learning the language of the people to whom they have come.

But how is ability to speak Chinese to be acquired? The language of China, which is one of the literary wonders of the world, is deservedly notorious for the thorny side it presents to foreigners. With its forty thousand characters

and (in North China) its four "tones", it sets up formidable barriers against those who seek to penetrate its mysteries.

The thought of it comes as a cold spray to damp the ardour of our enthusiasm when we purpose to make China the land of our adoption. Friends and well-wishers at home delight in dwelling on its difficulties. From the witches' cauldron in which they prepare the potion which is to cure us of our unwise love for China, they bring out and hold up before our shrinking gaze many a horrid spectacle of unparadonable error unwittingly committed by foreigners in China, and delicately hint, that we, who are in no wise better than our elders, can scarcely hope to avoid similar experiences.

Those few among our acquaintance who have actually lived in China have tales to tell, which, in legal phrase, are equally, "calculated to create alarm and despondency". When they learned the language the typical Chinese teacher was an ancient and dignified scholar, upon whom the weight of learning lay so heavily as to crush out all desire for activity, physical or mental. He resembled the sages of old, not only in his aloofness from mundane concerns, but also in his superiority to the use of soap and water and cleansing agents of every kind, and he was the proud possessor of finger nails such as his own national dragon need not have blushed to own. The chief medium of communication between the personage and his pupil were the Mandarin textbook and the dictionary, and the daily hours of study were apt to be characterized by dullness and perplexity unutterable. "But", say the veterans for our comfort, "that was in the days when there was no Language School in Peking."

We had not been long in China before we realized the significance of their words. The North China Union Language School has changed the face of things for the younger generation of foreigners in Mandarin speaking China. The wild and fiery steed which formerly had to be pursued in an exhausting and often disorderly chase around the linguistic paddock is now captured and led up to its would-be rider by the bridle of an efficient teaching method, and although there still remains to him the task of mounting and mastering it, he is saved no small loss of time and nervous energy.

When we arrive in China and find ourselves, for the time being, deaf, dumb, and illiterate, we hasten with all speed to Peking to try to remedy these defects. In the beginners' classes at the Language School we are cheered to find a great many others in the same case as ourselves. From our first day at the School we are provided with an extraordinarily

varied and effective programme of work, and although it dismays us somewhat to be told that not a word of English is spoken in class, actual acquaintance with the direct method of teaching soon dispels this feeling.

When we assemble for our first class, a Chinese teacher with a refreshingly vigorous manner addresses us. He obviously enjoys doing so, and accompanies his words with dramatic gesture of an unexpected ingenuity. To our own surprise, we understand him, for he speaks only of things which we can see. We discover that he has a sense of humour, and gusts of mirth greet the genial jests with which he besprinkles the lesson. The hour passes with an astonishing swiftness.

A bell rings, and after a brief interval another teacher enters the room. He repeats the same words as the first, simply varying the illustrative drama and the unpremeditated witticisms. Then comes a recess period, and afterwards one may attend a short chapel service, or perhaps there is a lecture in English on some topic of general interest. When that is over, class work begins again. Thus the hours of the school day pass, and each successive lesson cements and makes firmer the foundation laid in the first.

When we have spent a week or so in thus training our ears to the sounds of the Chinese language, we are allowed to begin to talk, greatly to our own satisfaction. Haltingly at first, then with greater assurance, we reproduce the words we have heard, and our teachers are clever enough to catch the meaning of what we say despite our eccentricities of utterance. Hours spent in class now alternate with hours of private study with an individual teacher. Round the courtyards of the Chinese premises in which the Language School is housed are numbers of little wooden huts—"horseboxes" we irreverently call them—and during School hours every little hut is occupied by a Chinese teacher and his pupil.

There are seventy-five Chinese members of the school staff, and every one of them has been especially trained for his work. It is scarcely possible to imagine a greater contrast than that which exists between the methods they use and those of the conservative pundit of the up-country station, to whom the science of pedagogy is unheard of, or at best is a kind of fabulous monster whose fame has blown in on winds of rumour from afar.

It is not until we have progressed some little distance in the arts of listening and speaking that we begin to learn to

read and write. This is a tedious process at first, but here too aids are at hand in the form of vastly interesting explanation of the history of the character forms we are studying, and of the meaning of the elements that compose them.

Under such favourable conditions failure to learn is made difficult. Even the Mrs Gummidges amongst us, who naturally, "feel things more than other people," and are apt to regard the vagaries of the language of the Middle Kingdom as a personal affront, find at the Language School that after all, Providence is kind, and that by dint of a certain amount of determined application to the matter in hand, the most troublesome knots in tongue or memory can be straightened out.

But the learning of Chinese is not the only preparation we make for our future work. Those who plan our curriculum are men of vision, who realize that the man or woman who will be most useful in China is the one who understands not only the speech of the people but also something of their traditions and history, their social conditions and modes of thought, their philosophy and their religions. Men who have given a life time of study to these things, specialists each in his own branch of investigation, conduct courses of lectures in the school, and in visits to the temples and markets and social institutions of the city, we find practical demonstration of what we have learned in the class rooms.

In the midst of the teeming life of the capitol, at the very heart and center of the most progressive movements in the Empire, we have the opportunity of contact with the vital forces which are moulding the life of the nation. The centuries look down upon us from the walls of the ancient Forbidden City while the spirit of New China stirs among the thronging multitudes in schools and streets and market places. Truly, to live in Peking, during one's first months in China is not the least among the advantages of the new way of learning Chinese.

It is not surprising that when the foreign communities in North China became aware of the presence of the Language School in their midst, they spent little time in hesitation before availing themselves of its opportunities and privileges. Eight great missionary societies two national legations and a Chamber of Commerce are now represented upon its Board of Directors and the yearly increasing numbers who enroll in its classes are an index to the popularity which has made it the largest school of Chinese Studies in the world.